Love at First Sound

Remarkable twists of fate bound the master musician to his enchanted violin

By Josef Totzauer with Allen Rankin

In the Bavarian village of Toelz, during the 18th century, there lived a violin maker named Johannes Jais. He was a magician who could transform pieces of wood into priceless instruments that would bring beauty and joy to the world down through the ages.

One day in 1739 an old woodcarver brought Jais a short, thick section of maple log. "Johannes," he said, "this log is too hard for my work. Perhaps you could use it for one of your violins."

For Jais it was a mighty task to saw into the iron-hard log, but its unusual color inspired him. Days later, he extracted from the log's heart an oblong block with flaming, deep-orange whorls. With his plane and knife he shaped it laboriously into the hardest and thinnest back he had ever made for a violin.

Jais completed the instrument and tested it for tone. "This little violin from the heart of your iron stump," he told the woodcarver, "has enchantment in her voice. Happy will be the artists who can awaken the soul of this instrument!"

So began the legend.

About 175 years later, in 1914, it was my good fortune to begin sharing my life with Jais's creation. As the 18-year-old concertmaster of the opera house in Koenigsberg, East Prussia, I needed a fine violin for solo performances. From those offered by dealers, I picked out one slightly smaller than the rest—at first, because of its glowing rust color. The faded inscription inside read: "Johannes Jais, Toelz, Lute and Violin Maker, 1739." I tuned the instrument and then began

to play Beethoven's F Major Romance.

It was love at first sound. What a tone—sparkling, crystalline, unique. "Ah, my little beauty," my heart cried to her, "we bring out the best in each other!"

I purchased her immediately and called her my Jaisie.

For a few brief months, she made my concerts sparkle. Then World War I interrupted. For four years my Jaisie lay silently stored away in a closet in my native Bohemian village of Trossau, near Carlsbad, Austria.

After the war, I hurried home to liberate Jaisie. As the lights came on again in the glittering music palaces of Europe, what days we had, Jaisie and I! Her resonance and versatility began winning me acclaim. I adored her. She said for me all the things other violins could only try to say.

One night, returning after a concert, I climbed the darkened four flights of stairs to my rooms. I was fumbling for my key when Jaisie fell out of her case and went hurtling down the marble steps. Nearly paralyzed with shock, I turned on the stairwell light, dreading what I'd find.

As I searched, the timed electric light shut off. With shaking fingers I lit a match . . . another . . . another. Finally, through the dim light appeared the outline of the violin, lying at the very bottom of the stairs. I rushed to what I feared would be her shattered remains.

I couldn't believe what I saw. The Jais had survived the four-flight slide down hard marble edges with only minor damage. The delicate violin had ridden all the way down on her flexible and shielding strings. Her two exquisitely wrought upper corners had been blunted a little, but needed no repair, just recoloring.

Her tone was as good as ever, as she proved during a performance that week of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. The audience responded with shouts of "Bravo!" And one critic, quite properly, was more generous to the Jais than to me: "The violin, under the versatile command of Josef Totzauer's bow, performed with crystal-clear brilliance. Its magnificent sound will linger long in our memory."

Johannes Jais's enchanted violin was a great asset when I began studying with master teachers at the conservatory in Leipzig. One rainy morning, as I was biking to the conservatory, I started across a broad intersection and threaded my way through a barrage of fast-moving trucks and carriages. The bicycle suddenly skidded, the violin case tucked under my arm fell to the street, and my priceless Jaisie spilled onto the wet cobblestones. A huge truck ran straight over it. My heart stopped. Frantically, I zigzagged back through the traffic to the disaster site.

There was Jaisie, lying on her belly in almost exactly the same position I'd found her at the bottom

of the staircase. If the truck's wheels had hit her at all, they must only have grazed her with the gentlest whisper. I sent a prayer heavenward, wiped off the mud and rushed home to examine her more closely.

Incredibly, her tone was almost the same as before, but I say *almost.* I began to feel that she had lost some sparkle, and the feeling grew. Perhaps her sound post had been jostled a hairbreadth from its original position. For weeks I tried to readjust it—never quite to my satisfaction. Or was I just imagining that the tone had dulled?

I'm afraid I had come to take the faithful Jais's rare gifts for granted. Besides, to tell the truth, I was becoming infatuated with a French Vuillaume that was for sale—a gorgeous, darkly burnished violin with a much more powerful voice. For months I struggled with my conscience. Then I betrayed Jaisie, trading her in for the temptress Vuillaume.

This was one of the great mistakes of my life. The voluminous sound of the Vuillaume diminished considerably after it was played for several hours in succession. But its main fault was that it did not speak to and for me. I rushed back to the Leipzig dealer. "Sorry," he said, "a gentleman from Czechoslovakia purchased the Jais last week. He paid cash and withheld his name and address."

I cursed my fickleness. But there was no time to search for Jaisie. Czechoslovakia had taken over the Austrian territory of my birth, and I rebelled against serving in the Czechoslovak army. I fled to America, leaving behind, at age 26, an established reputation for anonymity in a strange land.

I traveled across the vast new country until the train deposited me at a town called Lawrence, Neb. There I was greeted by my great-uncle, Joseph Keilbert, who had immigrated to America 60 years earlier and done well. He and his friends lined up some concert engagements, and soon the big-voiced Vuillaume—a good friend after all—was hard at work. Still, my thoughts kept returning to my lost Jaisie.

The years passed. At 33, I married and moved to New Jersey to be close to New York City and its musical opportunities. Bighearted America was good to us, as both my concert and teaching careers flourished. Eventually I was able to buy a Guarnerius, a violin that can answer any demand an artist makes upon it. Yet not even this instrument kept me from remembering the more satisfying violin of my youth.

I was 56 when a Nebraska musician I had completely forgotten about wrote asking a favor. He reminded me that, 25 years earlier, he had asked me where in Europe he could find a master violin. From one of the dealers I had recommended, his letter said, he had found the instrument he wanted. Now the ailing musician could no longer play this violin. Would

I take it and find a buyer who would really appreciate it?

I hesitated, being swamped with work just then. But how could I turn down the plea of a fellow musician who was ill?

The day the wooden crate arrived from Nebraska, my mind was on new students and concert schedules. As I began removing the wrapping from the violin, I suddenly ceased to breathe as I noticed two blunted corners. Turning the instrument over, I saw, through a mist of tears, the russet flames glowing from Johannes Jais's magic maple. The violin the musician had brought back to Nebraska from Europe years ago was my beloved Jaisie! She had found her way back to me, across the seas and continents, after more than 30 years.

I felt like the prince who was about to kiss Sleeping Beauty. "How I have missed you!" my heart cried as, once again, I pressed her to my shoulder and played. I promised Jaisie that we would never again part, and we never have.

THAT WAS 36 YEARS AGO. I'm 92 now. My bow shakes a little at times. The mighty Guarnerius, the public's favorite, is long gone—sold. But my Jaisie and I still perform, mainly for each other, in the privacy of my room in Greenville, N.C., where I live with my daughter and my grandchildren. Jaisie never disappoints me, always ignores my bumbled notes, exalts my better passages.

Except for the faintly blunted corners, Jaisie doesn't have a dent or scratch. And she has mellowed to a more brilliant tone than ever.

"You really must live a charmed life," I tell her. And I have, too, under the always consoling spell of her company.

Josef Totzauer continued to play his beloved violin every day until his death, suddenly, on July 5, 1989.

Huh?

Headline in the Cincinnati *Enquirer:* "NEW STUDY OF OBESITY LOOKS FOR LARGER TEST GROUP."

In the Victoria, B.C., Canada, *Times-Colonist:* "FOREST EXPERTS COMING HERE TO TALK ROT."

On an article in the Maine *Sunday Telegram:* "NEIGHBORS ASKED TO STOP BARKING."

In the Gettysburg, Pa., *Times:* "LITTLESTOWN LECTURE SERIES STARTS WITH SEX."

On an item in the Northern Virginia *Daily:* "BOARD ENDORSES FUNDING TO ASSIST POLLUTED RESIDENTS."